

# SUPERSTITIONS, FOLK MEDICINES AND CHILDREN'S FOLKLORE

## SUPERSTITIONS

Prior to the twentieth century when many things that seemed unusual could not always be explained scientifically, many groups of people made up stories or beliefs to explain why such an odd thing happened, or what could be done to prevent it from happening again. The Volga Germans had a large group of such beliefs some of which are listed below.

### Evening Time

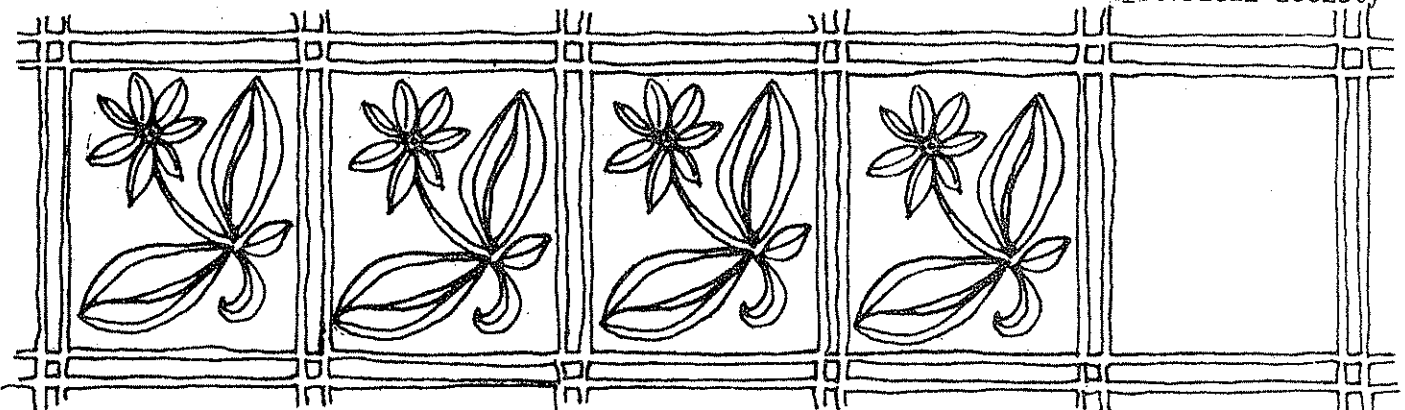
Volga Germans brought a fear of the dark with them from Russia. Part of that fear was based upon the Volga German's terrible experiences with nighttime raids by the Kirghiz tribesmen. As darkness fell, the villagers, especially those who had live through one of the raids, became fearful of another surprise attack. Also, darkness was the time when evil spirits, witches, etc, could do their wicked deeds without detection. Hence, the Volga German frequently blessed himself (made the sign of the cross on his chest) if he heard a strange noise at night.

If a cow was found covered with sweat in the morning, it was believed that a ghost had been riding it all night. The cow's udders were blessed to counteract the ghost's evil.

### Palm Leaves and Holy Water

The goodness of the Church and everything associated with the Church was considered a strong protection against evil. Good luck and prosperity were also associated with

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religion and religious objects and ceremonies.

Palm leaves which had been used in Palm Sunday ceremonies prior to Easter were thought to possess especially strong powers of goodness and luck.

Volga German families burned palm leaves and threw the ashes outside to help calm a severe storm. They also placed pieces of palm leaf in various rooms in the house for protection.

Palm leaf was thought to bring about a good crop if it was placed in the soil of a Volga German's fields. Put in the barn, the palm leaf was supposed to increase the chances of the farm animals giving birth to more healthy calves, lambs, etc. Pieces of palm leaf were also put into the shoes of the bride and groom on the night before their wedding to bring them good luck.

Holy water also was believed to have special powers. When sprinkled in all the rooms of a house during a storm, the house and family would be protected from the dangers of the bad weather. Holy water sprinkled on children was believed to keep them from harm.

### Rain

To Volga Germans who lived close to the land and to nature, the everyday occurrences of nature (rain, wind, storms, sunrise, phases of the moon, etc.) sometimes took on special meanings. Rain was a vital necessity to a people who depended upon water to make their crops grow. Hence, a number of superstitions grew that were concerned with rain.

Rain on the first Friday insured good rains for the rest of the month.

When a person dreamed of someone who had died, the next day would bring rain.

If rain fell into a grave before the corpse was buried, the soul of the deceased would go to Heaven...the rain had showered heavenly graces into the grave.

If rain fell on the eve of a burial and the grave had already been dug, it was believed that two or more deaths would occur in the near future.

A rainy Easter meant rain for the following seven consecutive Sundays.

## Death

Death in a Volga German village was a closer reality than it is for modern 20th century society. Illness and accidents took lives more often. With no hospitals or doctors readily available, people had to deal with sickness and death as best they could. As a consequence, many superstitions and beliefs developed about death and how to deal with it.

A hollow loaf of bread (a bubble had developed as it baked) was considered a sign that someone in the family would soon die.

After a death in the family, the grandfather's clock was stopped to remind others that time had stopped for the deceased and that all should consider the shortness of life.

When a family member died, it was customary to invite the poorest member of the village for a meal in honor of the deceased.

In some families and villages, doors were left open in the house so that the soul of the dead one could escape.

## Evil Spirits

Volga Germans brought with them from Russia a belief in evil spirits. The church and holy objects and verses were the strongest protection against these spirits. Children, especially new-born babies, were thought to be especially susceptible to harm by evil spirits.

## The Alp or Alpdrucker

The Alpdrucker was an evil spirit that sometimes could be a changeling. That means that the spirit could assume the look of a dog or cat or even of the baby itself. To guard against this Alp which wanted to do evil to Volga Germans and their children, several things were done. First, it was important to have the baby baptised. An unbaptised baby was easily hurt by the Alp. Crosses, rosaries, and prayer books were put under the pillows of mother and child to ward off the Alp. The Alp desired to rob the baby of its milk and thus make it ill from hunger. During Easter Holy Week, blessed

coal was used to mark crosses on the windows of the house to keep the Alp away. Volga Germans often used the five-pointed star drawn in chalk over the doorway of the house or on the baby's cradle to keep the Alp from working its evil. The star was known as the "Alpfuss" or Alp's foot. Often a special verse was recited by parents or another adult to ward off the Alp:

Alp, Dralp, über dem Rhein  
Sollst heint nacht weiter sein.  
Sollst alle Wässer baden,  
Alle Bäume blähten.  
Alp, Dralp, über dem Rhein  
Sollst heint nacht weiter sein.  
Väter, Sohn, und Heiliger Geist.

Alp, Dralp, go over the Rhein  
You should this night be far away.  
You should swim all the waters  
And climb all the trees.  
Alp, Dralp, go over the Rhein  
You should this night be far away.  
Father, Son, and Holy Ghost.

#### FOLK MEDICINE

Without doctors around in the villages to keep everyone in good health, the Volga Germans came to rely on their knowledge of herbs and other folk medicines to help them when they were ill. Some villagers specialized in these cures and became known for their knowledge. They would be consulted by the other villagers just like a doctor would be asked to help today.

A midwife or Umfrau helped a mother have her baby. The baby was born at home, not in a hospital. Doors were opened to make the birth an easier one. The mother was not allowed to go to sleep or to drink cold water. Often the newborn baby's eyes were washed with milk. Midwives continued to be used by Volga Germans well into the 20th century.

Another important medical person was the bone-setter. He had a special knack for setting broken bones and for helping strained muscles and sprains to heal. He, too, was an important member of the village well past 1900.

Medicines kept in the home included: 1) Camomile tea for stomach trouble. The yellow flower of the plant was used to brew the tea. 2) Spurge, a plant that grew wild in Ellis county, was used as a tea to help heal a person with intestinal illnesses. 3) Onion poultices and mustard plasters were put on people's chests to cure a cold.

4) Goose grease and different animal oils were kept by every family for healing and softening.

## CHILDREN'S FOLKLORE

### Families

Large families among the Volga Germans was the rule rather than the exception. Families in Ellis County frequently numbered ten, twelve, or fourteen persons. The extended family was also customary. Two or more married children and their families usually lived and worked at the home of the young husband's parents. Because it wasn't necessary to begin married life with one's own home, many children married young - at sixteen or seventeen. It was felt that the additional young daughter-in-law could be of help to the groom's mother in housework and daily chores. This however was often a difficult time for the young couple. Many women who lived in this kind of situation said they regularly cried themselves to sleep at night; there was just too much in-law interference.

### Childhood

Children were usually told that the midwives fished new babies out of the river. They were taught to obey and respect their parents and their elders. As a form of respect, older men in the village were called "Fedder" (uncle) and older women, "Wees" (aunt). Children did not talk back to older people. If this did happen, the older person told the parents of the child about the incident because all felt it was their duty to see to it that the children were properly trained.

When a child was punished at school for something he did, he would also be punished at home when his parents found out; parents backed up the teachers and believed that if he was spanked at school, he must have deserved it.

Girls always played with girls and boys with boys - participating in activities with youngsters of the opposite sex did not happen until they were in their late teens or early twenties. If parents were out visiting, a handful of boys and girls might

get together at one house, but no boy and girl were ever left alone together. During the winter months, the groups were usually limited to six or under because the house would simply not accommodate that many more. During the summer, larger groups of young people assembled when they could be outside.

Refreshments were usually sunflower seeds. Only a very few people had popcorn. To pop it, they would put clean, washed sand in the bottom of a round, iron kettle. When the sand became hot, corn was added. On the hot sand, the corn popped slowly and became big and fluffy. There was not a lid, so the popcorn popped out of the kettle and onto the floor. The children picked up the popped kernels, put them in a sieve, and shook the corn to get all the sand off. It was eaten plain without butter or salt.

Ice cream wasn't made until the Volga Germans came to the United States. If "Maroshna" (ice cream) was purchased, it came in a little paper cup with paper spoons. Frequently the ice cream man would take eggs and so the mother of the family would give each child an egg which they could exchange for a cup of ice cream. The only flavors were vanilla and peppermint.

#### OLD SAYINGS

Arbeit macht das Leben süß.

Work sweetens life.

Ein gutes Gewissen ist  
ein sanftes Ruhekitzen.

If you have a good conscience,  
you can sleep well.

Wer einmal lügt den glaubt  
man nicht und wann er auch  
die Wahrheit spricht.

If you lie once,  
you're not going to be believed  
even when you speak the truth.